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PALESTINE REFUGEE PROBLEM

UNITED NATIONS CONCILIATION COMMISSION FOR PALESTINE

MEMORANDUM SUBMITTED TO THE CONCILIATION COMMISSION
BY THE GOVERNMENT OF ISRAEL
17 March 1949

THE ARAB REFUGEE PROBLEM

Part One: The Problem

1. The Origins

The Conciliation Commission is not called upon to analyse the historical origins of the Arab refugee problem, but to find a solution for it - and to find it speedily, for the mass misery of the refugees has only temporarily been mitigated by international relief. Nevertheless, some reference to the immediate background is unavoidable. At the outset, it is necessary to repudiate the facile propaganda line that the refugees were driven from their homes by the Jews, who must accept responsibility for their fate. This is an attempt to obscure one basic and inescapable fact: if there had been no Arab war against the Jews, there would have been no Arab refugee problem! As for responsibility, the war trials at Nuremberg and Tokyo were designed to demonstrate that those who lead their people into a war of aggression must bear the blame for the sufferings caused by that war.

In the present case, the responsibility is even more specific. At the beginning of 1948 Arab civilians were already migrating from war areas. During the Spring, this movement spread, as morale declined in the face of Jewish resistance. When the first wave of "unofficial war" had spent itself and the tide of battle turned, the Arab leadership demanded the evacuation of Jewish-occupied towns and areas, as a matter of deliberate policy - to prevent the Arabs from settling down under Jewish control; to compel the Arab Governments to march their regular armies into Palestine when the Mandate ended; and to mobilise world opinion against the Jews. The migrants were promised that they would soon return at the heels of the conquering armies. This ill-conceived evacuation policy was tragic in its consequences.

The Haganah capture of Haifa town in April provides a typical case history showing the influences at work. The following passage is from a British eye-witness account published in the London "Economist":

> "During the subsequent days, the Jewish authorities .... urged all Arabs to remain in Haifa and guaranteed their protection and security .... Various factors influenced their decision to seek safety in flight .... far the most potent of these factors was the announcement made over the air by the Arab Higher Committee urging all Arabs in Haifa to quit. The reason given was that upon the final withdrawal of the British, the combined armies of the Arab States would invade Palestine and

drive the Jews into the sea. It was clearly intimated that those Arabs who remained in Haifa and accepted Jewish protection would be regarded as renegades."

Much has been made of the incident at Deir Yassin, where an attack by a dissident group was carried out with unnecessary cruelty. There is much cruelty in war, but specific incidents must be seen in perspective as such, and not confused with basic causes, for propaganda motives. The Israeli authorities can produce a massive volume on the barbarities inflicted by Arabs upon Jewish civilians, captured Jewish soldiers, and even Jewish corpses. They have, however, imposed self-restraint upon themselves of reluctance still further to inflame the bitter memories which are the legacy of strife.

2. Numbers and Location

There are 260 abandoned Arab villages and 8 abandoned Arab urban areas within Israeli occupied territory. The number of inhabitants who have evacuated the villages is estimated at 360,000 on the basis of 1945 census figures, slightly reduced in accordance with a subsequent Israeli Government check. Assuming the 1945 census figures for the town areas to have been correct in 1948 - an assumption which may be questioned in view of the census experience in the Arab villages - the number of Arabs who left these towns would be 228,000. The total for towns and villages would not therefore exceed the round figure of 530,000.

The bulk of the migration was to the Arab areas of Palestine outside the Jewish State. Some of the wealthy Arabs fled to the Arab capitals, to Europe and to South America, while many Arabs living near the borders of Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, found refuge in these countries when their areas became part of the battle zone. Thus the Arabs of the Beisan Valley crossed over into Transjordan, the Arabs of the Huleh area to Syria, the Arabs of Safed to the Lebanon, and part of Jaffa's population reached Egypt and the Sudan.

3. Repatriation or Resettlement?

It is understandable that the Arab Governments should demand a return of the refugees, who have become for them a financial burden and a source of unrest. When the whole matter comes up for discussion, in the context of general peace talks, the Israeli Government will consider whether conditions are stable enough for a certain number to come back without creating a security problem. The main solution is not repatriation, but resettlement elsewhere.

Mass repatriation cannot be achieved by the simple formula suggested in the language of paragraph eleven of the General Assembly Resolution of December 11, 1948. It is not a mere matter of permission to "return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours"; an extensive planned program of "economic and social rehabilitation" is called for whether the refugees are brought back to Israel or settled somewhere else. During the war and the Arab exodus, the basis of their economic life crumbled away.

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Moveable property which was not taken away with them has disappeared. Livestock has been slaughtered or sold. Thousands of town and village dwellings have been destroyed in the course of the fighting, or in order to deny their use to enemy forces, regular or irregular; and of those which remain habitable, most are serving as temporary homes for immigrants. Middle class elements - shopkeepers, professional men, ex-officials, clerks - would have to make a fresh start in an envirement which already differs radically from the mandatory Palestine they left behind. The changes which have taken place, and the problems of adjustment which they would require, are much greater than the absentees realise. Finally, the whole economy of this little State is being geared to a gigantic immigration program, with which the needs of a repatriation project would have to compete. To sum up, from the purely practical point of view it would be at least as costly and difficult an operation to resettle the refugees in Israel as to resettle them elsewhere. In Macbeth's words: "Returning were as tedious as go o'er".

But even if repatriation were economically feasible, is it politically desirable? Would it make sense to recreate that dual society which has bedeviled the Palestine scene for so long, until it led eventually to open war? Under the happiest of circumstances, a complex and uncertain situation is created where a single state must be shared by two or more peoples who differ in race, religion, language and culture. Most such situations have been resolved by migration, voluntary or forced, and with or without international agreement. The recent history of Europe and Asia is replete with examples. It is hardly surprising that some of the best minds which have studied the Palestine question have thought in terms of population transfers. The Peel Report advocated an exchange between the Jewish and Arab States. In 1938 Dr. Walter Clay Lowdermilk proposed the settlement of Palestine Arabs in Iraq. Other such proposals have been made by Sir Norman Angell (1941), Mr. Herbert Hoover (1945), and the British Labour Party (1945). The question confronting all such proposals was whether the groups concerned would be prepared to move. Now that they have in fact moved, in the backwash of an unsuccessful war, it is hardly statesmanlike to attempt to reverse the process, especially when suitable alternatives present themselves. The only rational approach is to integrate the refugees into those Arab countries which have room for them and where they would raise no problems of racial or cultural dualism.

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Part Two: Resettlement in Arab States

A. Rural Settlers

1. General Possibilities

Three of the five neighbouring Arab states - Syria, Iraq and Transjordan - are underpopulated and possess areas suitable for large-scale agricultural development.

The attached table shows that the absorptive capacity and population density of these states could be increased many times if they were to follow Egypt's lead in intensive farming, and to increase their irrigated areas.

This table indicates the difference in population density per square kilometre in "cultivated areas" and in "produce-bearing areas". The latter figures are more realistic than those based on cultivable or cultivated land, for we are dealing here with Middle East countries where the "fallow system" prevails in agriculture, i.e., the soil is cultivated but remains fallow, sometimes for as long as two years. On the other hand there are many areas of land which are worked intensively and produce as many as three different crops a year, for example in Egypt, where land is worked continuously both in winter and in summer. In such cases, the "produce-bearing area" may be 60% larger than the "cultivated area", i.e. the actual physical area.

This explains the difference in the figures of population density for cultivated and produce-bearing areas respectively. In Egypt, the density is less for "produce-bearing" than for "cultivated" areas, while in other Middle East countries the converse is the case.

The influence of irrigation on population density can be observed by comparing the irrigated areas with the "produce-bearing" areas. In Syria, for example, the irrigated area is 23.1% of the "produce-bearing" area, and the population density is 264 per sq. km. In Palestine, the irrigated area is 6.4% of the produce-bearing are and the density of population is 214 per sq. km. It is interesting to note that in Iraq the population density is lower - only 185 people per sq. km. - although the irrigated area is 28.8% of the "produce-bearing" area. This is due to the primitive methods used for cultivating the land - most of the irrigation being designed for the cultivation of wheat and not for intensive farming.

In comparing the density of population in Iraq, Syria and Transjordan with that of Egypt we may deduce that if those countries were to apply in their irrigated areas the same techniques of cultivation used in Egypt, the density of population in relation to the cultivated area would be equal to that of Egypt and economic possibilities would be created for the increase of their population by at least 6,750,000 persons. And if we were to take into consideration the possibility of increasing the areas of irrigated land - in Iraq up to 50,000 square kilometres and in Syria up to 12,000 sq. km. - the absorptive capacity of these countries would be increased by

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many millions.

It can therefore be stated that any one of these three countries (but especially Syria or Iraq) is capable by itself of resettling all of the rural refugees, and that these refugees would take up only a fraction of the combined absorptive capacity of these countries. These three states, which at one time or another during the past 25 years have sought additional settlers to work their uncultivated areas, could indeed make excellent use of the Arab refugees whose contacts with the modern Palestinian Jewish community have taught them modern agricultural techniques.

2. Some Specific Areas

In order to appreciate the resettlement possibilities in these countries more fully, a number of specific areas within them are dealt with in greater detail.

(a) Habaniah Project

In Iraq, west of the Euphrates, in the vicinity of Baghdad, lies a valley encircling Habaniah Lake. An irrigation project has been under way in this area since 1913, with the purpose of developing a system of flood control, constructing water reservoirs, and irrigating uncultivable parcels of land. It is expected that the first stage of this project will be completed by 1951, adding over 3 million dunams of cultivable land to the country's agricultural economy. When the second stage of the project has been completed, 7 million additional dunams will be available for cultivation The cost of the entire project is estimated at 3 million pounds sterling. (Middle East Supply Centre, Production of Food in Iraq and Persia, P.488).

How many people will this newly developed agricultural area be capable of supporting? This can be determined if we ascertain the number of dunams required per family unit to meet its budgetary needs. Based upon the experience in Iraq of the Latifia Real Estate Management Company, as outlined in a lecture given by the Company's manager, Mr. W. D. Garbot at the Cairo Agricultural Conference in February, 1944, each family unit would require 50 dunams of land, or 10 dunams per person.

It should be emphasized, however, that this figure remains valid only if the land involved belongs to those who work it and is not subject to high rentals. Furthermore, the figure of 50 dunams per family unit is based on the assumption that the water rates charged for irrigation purposes are nominal, resulting in the increased development of the more profitable summer crops, and that an improved system of crop rotation would be inaugurated.

Under these conditions, which are not unreasonable, the Habaniah project alone could, by 1951, comfortably support an additional agricultural population of 300,000 persons.

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DENSITY OF POPULATION IN RELATION TO CULTIVATED AND PRODUCE-BEARING AREAS IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES, 1943-1944 (i)

	Total Area in sq.km.	Cultivable Area in sq. km.	Cultivated Area in sq. km. (ii)	Irrigated Area in sq. km.	Produce Bearing Area in sq.km. (iii)	Population (in thousands)	Pop. density per sq. km. In cultivated area (ii)	Pop. density per sq. km. In Produce Bearing Area (iii)
Egypt	1,020,000	-	21,715	21,715	34,155	17,390	800	509
Palestine	27,000	12,000	8,745	500	7,810	1,673	191	213
Transjordan	90,000	8,200	5,060	260	2,430	400	79	164
Syria	1,710,000	53,000	18,220	2,500	10,810	2,860	156	264
Lebanon	-	-	5,260	-	5,260	1,126	214	214
Iraq	4,520,000	92,000	48,580	7,000	24,290	4,500	92	185

(i) Dorin and Rerner and various Arab sources.
(ii) This area includes tracts occasionally left fallow.
(iii) These figures include the area actually cultivated and whose yield is increased owing to the multiple system of crop rotation during a single year.

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(b) The Jezirah Project

In the northern part of Syria, between the Euphrates River and the Turkish boundary, there is a sector of land known as the Jezirah. The total area of this region is 38 million dunams, which are divided into the Euphrates district with less than 250 mm. of annual rainfall, and the northern hill district, near the Turkish border, with more bountiful rainfall.

We are concerned with the latter district, which possesses a cultivable area of 10 million dunams. Its fluctuating population, mostly Kurds, numbers 200,000 to 250,000, of whom four-fifths are engaged in agriculture. During the past 15 years, since mechanized agricultural techniques were introduced into this area, the population has increased threefold.

In his lecture to the Cairo Conference, referred to above, the representative of Syria, Major R. S. Villar, spoke in glowing terms of this district's future because of its cultivable soil and suitable climate (Conference Report No. 6, page 66). In 1944, the year of the Conference, the area under cultivation in this district was estimated at only 20% of the cultivable area, i.e. at 2 million dunams. The absorptive capacity of the district is four to five times as great as its present population density. If, however, one were to apply the unit measurement of absorptive capacity prevailing in the unirrigated areas of Palestine, i.e. one person for every 20 to 25 dunams of land, it could be shown that the Jezirah area would be capable of supporting an agricultural settlement of 400,000 to 500,000 persons. This means that the area could comfortably absorb an additional 250,000 to 350,000 settlers - i.e. the estimated number of the rural population among the Arab refugees.

(c) Transjordan

In Transjordan, it is estimated that of the 8,200,000 cultivable dunams, only 4,600,000 are cultivated. Of the 260,000 dunams under irrigation in this area in 1933, 206,000 dunams were in the Jordan Valley. The irrigated area supported 263,000 villagers.

If one were to consider cultivating the remaining 3,600,000 cultivable dunams - an increase of 78% over the existing cultivated area - even without introducing any new agricultural techniques or inaugurating big new irrigating schemes, it would be possible to absorb an additional agricultural population of 205,000, i.e. almost the entire number of the farmers among the Arab refugees.

This calculation, however, does not take into consideration the possibility of introducing new methods of farming and increasing the yield. The Jordan Valley alone, if farmed according to modern standards, can easily support between 40,000 and 60,000 additional farmers.

Transjordan is capable of resettling 250,000 of the Arab refugee farmers. What is needed is goodwill, planning and adequate financial resources.

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3. Distribution

Though it has been shown that any one of the three countries, Iraq, Syria and Transjordan, could settle 250,000 villagers from among the Arab refugees, it would be best to resettle them in all three countries in order to distribute the burden of resettlement more evenly among them, and base it as far as possible on existing distribution, to avoid additional transfers and hardships.

One should also bear in mind some of the special assets which these refugees possess - assets which should be distributed among these three Arab states. The Palestinian Arab refugees possess a higher degree of culture than do the inhabitants of the neighbouring states. There is a larger proportion of literates among them than prevails in a similar size group in any other Arab countries. Their contact with modern methods of agriculture and the skills in industrial and manufacturing pursuits which they have acquired in Palestine, can only serve as a blessing to these three Arab countries, where their presence would contribute greatly to raising the standard of living.

A plan to resettle the Arab refugees in the different Arab countries should take into consideration the following aspects:
a) The religious aspect indicates the Lebanon as the most suitable country for the resettlement of Christian refugees;
b) Transjordan seems to be the most suitable place for the refugees from the Ramleh and Jeruselem districts, and for those from the Beisan Valley;
c) The ethnic aspect would direct the Arabs originating in North Africa to Algiers and Morocco;
d) The climatic aspect would point to Iraq as the resettlement area for the refugees from the Huleh and seaboard areas. It would direct the refugees from the hill sections of Samaria and Galilee to Syria.

Based upon these considerations, the rural refugees would be distributed among the various Arab countries approximately as follows:

Transjordan	50,000
Syria	85,000
Lebanon	5,500
Algiers	1,500
Iraq	160,000
	302,000

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B. Urban Refugees

It is difficult to ascertain the true economic position of the 200,000 Arab evacuees from the towns of Palestine. It is fair, however, to assume that between 15% and 20% of them possess sufficient means to care for themselves. The remaining 80%-85% of refugees would be given financial grants and loans to establish themselves in occupations in the many towns and villages in which they have already found temporary refuge. The important consideration in their resettlement relates to proper distribution, so as not to cause unemployment and overcrowding. With the aid of outside funds, their rehabilitation is only a metter of time.

The following table suggests the number of Palestine city evacuees which might be resettled in the various Arab countries with the aid of outside funds :

	No. of city refugees
Iraq	70,000
Syria	35,000
Transjordan	13,000
Lebanon	57,000
TOTAL	175,000

These refugees are not so easily dealt with on a group basis, and the subject would have to be more fully explored.

CONCLUSION

The key to a solution lies in the fact that neighbouring countries need fresh manpower in order to develop their resources, and the refugees can fill these needs without any difficulties in assimilating themselves to the local populations. Given cooperation from all the Governments concerned, and the necessary financial and technical help from international sources, the operation would present no insurperable difficulties. Its success would relieve a pressing human problem and contribute greatly to stable relations between Israel and its neighbours.

Hakirya,

16th March, 1949

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